What follows American dominion?

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The unipolar era, a time of unprecedented American dominance, is over. It lasted some two decades, little more than a moment in historical terms.

Why did it end? One explanation is that states get better at generating and piecing together the human, financial and technological resources that lead to productivity and prosperity. The same holds for companies and other organisations. The rise of new powers cannot be stopped. The result is an ever larger number of actors able to exert influence regionally or globally. It is not that the US has grown weaker, but that many other entities have grown much stronger.

A second reason unipolarity has ended is US policy. By both what it has done and what it has failed to do, the US has accelerated the emergence of new power centres and has weakened its own position relative to them.

US energy policy (or the lack thereof) is one driving force behind the end of unipolarity. Since the first oil shocks of the 1970s, US oil consumption has grown by some 20 per cent and, more important, US imports of petroleum products have more than doubled in volume and nearly doubled as a percentage of consumption. This growth in demand for foreign oil has helped drive up the world price from just over $20 a barrel to more than $100 a barrel. The result is an enormous transfer of wealth and leverage to those states with energy reserves.

US economic policy has played a role as well. President George W. Bush's war in Afghanistan and Iraq, allowed discretionary spending to increase by 8 per cent a year and cut taxes. The US fiscal position declined from a surplus of more than $106bn in 2001 to an estimated deficit of about $250bn in 2007. The ballooning current account deficit is now more than 6 per cent of gross domestic product. This places downward pressure on the dollar, stimulates inflation and contributes to the accumulation of wealth and power elsewhere in the world. Poor regulation of the US mortgage market and the credit crisis it spawned have exacerbated these problems.

Iraq has also contributed to the dilution of American primacy. The conflict has proved to be an expensive war of choice - militarily, economically and diplomatically, as well as in human terms. Years ago, the historian Paul Kennedy outlined his thesis about "imperial overstretch", which posited that the US would eventually decline by overreaching, just as other great powers had. Prof. Kennedy's theory turned out to apply most immediately to the Soviet Union, but the US - for all its corrective mechanisms and dynamics - has not proved to be immune.

Finally, unipolarity's end is not simply the result of the rise of other states and organisations or of the failures and follies of US policy. It is also a consequence of globalisation. Globalisation has increased the volume, velocity and importance of cross-border flows of just about everything, from drugs, e-mails, greenhouse gases, goods and people to television and radio signals, viruses (virtual and real) and weapons. Many of these flows take place outside the control of governments and without their knowledge. As a result, globalisation dilutes the influence of big powers, including the US.

These same flows often strengthen non-state actors, such as energy exporters (who are experiencing a dramatic increase in wealth), terrorists (who use the internet to recruit and train, the international banking system to move resources and the global transport system to move people), rogue states (which can exploit black and grey markets) and Fortune 500 companies (which quickly move personnel and investments). Being the strongest state no longer means having a near-monopoly on power. It is easier than ever before for individuals and groups to accumulate and project substantial power.

All of this raises a critical question: if unipolarity is gone, what will take its place? Some predict a return to the bipolarity that characterised international relations during the cold war. This is unlikely. China's military strength does not approximate that of the US; more important, its focus will remain on economic growth, a choice that leads it to seek economic integration and avoid conflict. Russia may be more inclined towards re-creating a bipolar world, but it too has a stake in co-operation and, in any event, lacks the capacity to challenge the US.

Still others predict the emergence of a modern multipolar world, one in which China, Europe, India, Japan and Russia join the US as dominant influences. This view ignores how the world has changed. There are literally dozens of meaningful power centres, including regional powers, international organisations, companies, media outlets, religious movements, terrorist organisations, drug cartels and non-governmental organisations. Today's world is increasingly one of distributed, rather than concentrated, power. The successor to unipolarity is neither bipolarity nor multipolarity. It is non-polarity.

Those who welcome America's comeuppance and unipolarity's replacement by non-polarity should hold their applause. Forging collective responses to global problems and making institutions work will be more difficult. Threats will multiply. Relationships will be more difficult to build and sustain. The US will no longer have the luxury of a "You're either with us or against us" foreign policy. But neither will anyone else. Only diplomacy that is more focused, creative and collective will prevent a non-polar world from becoming more disorderly and dangerous.

The author is president of the Council on Foreign Relations. This article is drawn from an essay that appears in the May/June issue of Foreign Affairs.